



Nidderdale
National
Landscape



A guide to grassland management for birds of prey

Before using this resource, you may want to use our '[A Guide to Understanding Grassland Types](#)' document to better understand which type of grassland you currently own/manage. With this knowledge you will be better equipped to create a species-rich grassland suited to your area and aims.

What are birds of prey?

Birds of prey include species such as **hawks, owls and falcons**. They can be identified by their hook shaped beaks and sharp curved claws (talons). They mainly eat small mammals, reptiles, amphibians and other scavengeable food such as dead carcasses. Birds of prey are **vital to balanced and healthy ecosystems** through controlling pest species, removing sick animals and reducing instances of disease.

In Nidderdale National Landscape (NNL) you will be most likely to see the following species:

- Barn owl
- Tawny owl
- Short-eared owl
- Red Kite
- Buzzard
- Sparrowhawk
- Kestrel

There are many other bird of prey species not included within this list.

Threats to birds of prey

Some threats to birds of prey include **habitat loss, a lack of food during harsher months, bad weather and illegal killing**. Managing a grassland to benefit these amazing birds will provide them with some well needed good quality habitat.

How to help birds of prey?

Below are grassland management techniques that will help provide birds of prey with both **feeding and breeding habitats**. This document will primarily focus on grassland management techniques that support owl populations, but these management techniques will also benefit a wide variety of other birds of prey such as kestrels and sparrowhawks.

Managing 'rough' grassland

Birds of prey such as barn owls require lots of food to sustain themselves – **an adult barn owl needs to eat 3 or 4 prey items a night**. Prey species like field voles live within tussocky rough grassland, scrubby areas, along hedgerows and woodland edges. Most birds of prey **require open grassy areas** to hunt effectively. Rough grassland next to a hedgerow or woodland edge is the perfect combination as birds of prey can perch in the trees to find prey in the field.



Figure 1. An example of rough grassland comprised of tall, tussocky vegetation with last year's growth still present. Prey species such as field voles will live in tussocks and under the dead vegetation. Credit Joseph Haywood

Rough grasslands are areas that have been allowed to grow unhindered for a number of years **without being mown or heavily grazed**. While they may look "untidy" and not as colourful as hay meadows during summer, **rough grasslands are an amazing habitat where birds of prey can feed**.

Rough grassland can be managed on a 3-year cycle. Mow or lightly graze a rough grassland every third year in late-summer/autumn to prevent tree saplings from establishing. If possible, having multiple patches of rough grassland in the cycle ensures that while one area is being mown/grazed, there is always some rough grassland untouched.



Figure 2. Red kite soaring. Credit Paul Skirrow

Incorporating rough grassland within a landscape is a fairly easy task. If a grassland is managed solely by grazing, then simply **fencing off areas** will allow rough grassland to develop.

If a grassland is mown, **then leave strips along boundary edges or corners of fields unmown**. For barn owls, a **strip 6m wide** is optimal as that's the extent of their hearing when hunting. If livestock are also present, then unmown areas may need to be **fenced off** to prevent livestock getting in. However, if the stocking density in the field is low (approximately 3 – 6 sheep per hectare per year) then light grazing of those areas is OK.

Mow rough grassland with a topper, strimmer or scythe, depending on the size of the area, **leaving 4 – 6 inches of vegetation standing. Do not cut all the way down to the ground** as this may kill small mammals nesting at the bottom of tussocks.

Providing nests and roosts

Kestrels, barn owls and tawny owls are **cavity-nesting birds** and would naturally build nests within hollows of dead trees. In a more human landscape, old farm buildings provide nesting spaces, however, modern developments make these buildings less suitable by patching access holes and removing ledges.

Installing an **artificial nest box** is a great way to attract birds of prey to your area. In addition to providing rough grassland to feed in, your area will be all set to support birds of prey. Don't be disappointed if a nest box is not used straight away, it can take several years.

Nest boxes need to be at least 3m above the ground - the higher the box the better it is for owlets generally. Face nest boxes ideally towards the north or east out of prevailing winds and direct sunlight. Avoid dense wooded areas and try keep the entrance hole open and uncovered. Perches nearby help owlets fledge the nest more easily.

Other Resources

Below is a list of other resources available on the internet to gather information from.

[Ulster Wildlife Trust: Improving habitats for barn owls](#)

[Shropshire Barn Owl Group](#)

Funding

To help fund grassland management, try and take advantage of agri-environment schemes. These can help fund restoration works and ongoing management. Below are two funding schemes which you may be eligible for.

Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI):

[Sustainable Farming Incentive: guidance for applicants and agreement holders](#) – this is currently unavailable and will become available in April 2026.

Countryside Stewardship Higher Tier (CSHT):

[Countryside Stewardship Higher Tier](#)



Contact Us

If there is something you'd like to get in touch with us about managing your grasslands, please contact us using one of the methods below.

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